

An In-Depth Guide to the Wines of Champagne

- History of the Region
- Location, Geology and Climate
- The Champagne Method
- Label Terminology and Styles
- Sub-Regions and Villages
- Recent Vintages
- Tasting!



Location

- Along 48th Parallel
- Mean annual temperature: 50 F
- Belemnite and micraster chalk soils with high limestone content

History: Why Champagne Is the Way It Is

- Vineyards date to the 400s; Champagne was traditionally a still-wine region
- Cold winters habitually caused fermentation to stop... followed by refermentation and exploding bottles as weather warmed up in the spring
- 1729: Ruinart was first house in region to create exclusively sparkling wines
- Early 1800s:



- Widow Clicquot pioneered riddling process
- Jean-Pascal Chaptal identified relationship between sugar and fermentation
- Improvements in glass and cork made for stronger bottles
- Late 1800s:
 - Development of larger houses that bought grapes from smaller producers, who couldn't afford Champagne Method
 - Rise of Champagne as luxury product as it gained popularity with international royalty
- 1908: Champagne region delimited
- 1911: Champagne riots from protesting Aube producers who were excluded from the region (Aube reinstated in 1927)
- Early 1900s: Champagne occupied during WWI and WWII; vineyards and cellars suffered
- 1936: Champagne added to new AOC system
- 1941: *Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne* formed
- Late 1900s: Continuing rise of Champagne's international popularity and large houses grow through mergers and acquisitions

The Champagne Method

- a.k.a. *Méthode Champenoise*, *Méthode Traditionnelle*, or Traditional Method
- Secondary fermentation happens in bottle
- Wine is aged on the lees (autolysis)
- Riddling (*remuage*) using pupitre or gyropalette
- Disgorgement of sediment (*dégorgement à la glace*)
- Dosage to balance the wine
- Further aging
- Bottling

Amount of sugar in dosage...

- Extra Brut = 0-6 g/l
- Brut = 0-12 g/l
- Extra Dry = 12-17 g/l
- Sec = 17-32 g/l
- Demi-Sec = 32-50 g/l
- Doux = 50+ g/l

Aging Requirements...

- NV = at least 15 months from tirage
- Vintage = at least 3 years from tirage



Grape Varieties

- Pinot Noir (red): red berry fruit, power, structure
- Pinot Meunier (red): fruitiness, body and accessibility
- Chardonnay (white): citrus and apple notes, elegance and brightness

Label Terminology and Styles

NV: Non-Vintage

Blanc de Blancs: white wine from white grapes

Blanc de Noirs: white wine from “black” (red) grapes

Cuvée: a blend of wines used to make a particular bottling (*tête de cuvée* is the house’s top bottling)

Négociant (NM): a house that buys grapes to make its wine (can also grow grapes)

Grower Champagne (RM): from a house that grows all its own grapes rather than buys from others

Extra Brut / Brut / Extra Dry / Sec / Demi-Sec / Doux

Organization: Appellations

- Major towns of Reims and Epernay are home to biggest houses
- Broken into five sub-regions:
 - Montagne de Reims
 - Vallée de la Marne
 - Côtes des Blancs
 - Côte de Sézanne
 - Aube (aka Côtes des Bar)
- 357 villages authorized to grow Champagne grapes
 - Each village gets a ranking in the Echelle des Crus
 - 17 Grand Cru villages
 - 44 Premier Cru villages

Components Affecting Style

- Grapes
- Vineyards
- Oak use
- Malolactic fermentation
- Blending
- Period of autolysis
- Dosage
- Period of bottle aging



Louis Roederer Brut Premier NV - Reims, Montagne de Reims

- Reims is the “capital” of Champagne; most large houses are based here
- Louis Roederer is a négociant manipulant (NM); they also own many vineyards throughout the region
- Grapes for this cuvée come from throughout Champagne; the still wines are carefully blended to create a wine in line with house style
- Brut is most common style: 0-12 grams per liter residual sugar
- NV = Non-Vintage
- This is the same Roederer house that makes Cristal, their tête de cuvée

Pierre Moncuit Hugues de Coulmet Blanc de Blancs Brut NV - Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Côte des Blancs

- Côte des Blancs is known for Chardonnay
- Le Mesnil-sur-Oger is a Grand Cru, certified as such in 1985, known for extreme elegance
- Blanc de Blancs = 100% Chardonnay
- Pierre Moncuit is a grower producer (RM), run today by Nicole Moncuit (winemaker), her brother Yves and her daughter Valérie
- Nicole Moncuit uses stainless steel tanks and malolactic fermentation
- Dosage is 8 grams/liter

Serge Mathieu Blanc de Noirs Brut '05 - Avirey-Lingey, Aube

- Aube is southernmost sub-region of Champagne, closer to Chablis than Reims
- Blanc de Noirs; this is 100% Pinot Noir
- Serge Mathieu is a grower producer (RM); run today by Serge’s daughter, Isabelle, and son-in-law, Michel Jacob (winemaker)
- Stainless steel tanks and malolactic fermentation
- Dosage is 9.5 grams/liter

José Michel Pinot Meunier Brut NV - Moussy, Vallée de la Marne

- Vallée de la Marne stretches west from Epernay
- Vallée de la Marne best known for Pinot Meunier: the area is prone to fog and Meunier ripens earlier
- This is 100% Meunier
- RM José Michel known as one of (if not THE) top producers of Meunier
- Old vines, no malolactic, fermentation in oak barrels
- Dosage is 10 grams/liter



Jean Velut Rosé Brut NV - Montgueux, Aube

- Montgueux is way off in southwestern corner of the Aube, yet it is one of the most famous wine villages there
- Montgueux has very chalky soil that makes it ideal for Chardonnay
- Velut's vineyards are planted to 85% Chardonnay and 15% Pinot Noir
- RM Jean Velut now run by Jean's grandson Denis Velut
- Organic viticulture, stainless steel fermentation

Henriot Cuvée des Enchanteleurs '98 - Reims, Montagne de Reims

- Henriot established as growers in 1640 and started NM house in 1808
- Grapes for Enchanteleurs sourced from six Grand Cru villages: Mailly-Champagne, Verzy, Verzenay (MdR); Mesnil-sur-Oger, Avize, Chouilly (CdB)
- This is 50/50 Chardonnay/Pinot Noir
- Enchanteleurs is Henriot's tête de cuvée, made only in great years; this was aged 12 years in the cellar before release
- Named for the cellar workers during time of barrel vinification; stacking the barrels on the wooden beams was called *enchantelaient*
- Dosage 8-10 grams/liter

Recent Top Vintages

Best vintages have good ripeness balanced with bright acidity

- 2006: Rich fruit with finesse
- 2004: High quantity and quality, elegance
- 2002: Ripe, concentrated, extroverted
- 2000: Decent quality but also "novelty" of the millenium
- 1998: Very large quantity that did not sacrifice good quality
- 1997: High quality often overlooked by 95s and 96s
- 1996: Outstanding, very high acidity aligned with powerful fruit
- 1995: Generous fruit with low alcohol levels
- 1990: Dense with powerful aromatics
- 1989: Powerful, generous, rich
- 1988: Classic, finessed, conservative

